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## ABSTRACT

The simulated oral proficiency interview (SOPI) is a semi-direct speaking test that models the format of the oral proficiency interview (OPI). The OPI is a method of assessing general speaking proficiency in a second language. The SOPI is a tape-recorded test consisting of six parts: simple personal background questions posed in a simulated initial encounter with a native speaker, and five parts designed to elicit language similar to that elicited during the level check and probe phases of the OPI. Three of these parts use pictures in a test booklet to assess the speaker's ability to perform intermediate and advanced level functions. The last two parts require the examinee to tailor his discourse strategies to selected topics and real-life situations. The tape is scored by a trained rater using a standard scale. In five studies involving different test development teams and different languages, the SOPI has been shown to be a valid and reliable surrogate of the OPI. The SOPI offers certain practical and psychometric advantages over the OPI, including administration without a trained interviewer, simultaneous administration to a group by a single administrator, and reduced cost. (MSE)

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## A Comparative Analysis of Simulated and Direct Oral Proficiency Interviews

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This article introduces the reader to the simulated oral proficiency interview, and discusses the research that has been conducted on it to date. Subsequently, it compares this type of test with a face-to-face interview in respect to their reliability, validity, and practicality. Finally, it offers some reasons why the simulated oral proficiency interview is as good a measure of oral language proficiency as the face-to-face interview and describes the situations in which it may actually be preferable to the face-to-face format.

### Introduction

The simulated oral proficiency interview (SOPI) is a type of semi-direct speaking test that models, as closely as is practical, the format of the oral proficiency interview (OPI). The OPI is used by US Government agencies belonging to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to assess general speaking proficiency in a second language. The OPI, and the scale on which it is scored, is the precursor of the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (ASLPR).

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The measure I have called an SOPI (Stansfield, 1989) is a tape-recorded test consisting of six parts. It begins with simple personal background questions posed on the tape in a simulated initial encounter with a native speaker of the target language. During a brief pause, the examinee records a short answer to each question. Part one is analogous to the "warm-up" phase of the OPI. The remaining five parts are designed to elicit language that is similar to that which would be elicited during the level check and probe phases of the OPI. Parts two, three, and four employ pictures in a test booklet to check for the examinee's ability to perform the various functions that characterize the Intermediate and Advanced levels of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, or levels one and two of the ILR skill level descriptions. Thus, the examinee is asked to give directions to someone using a map, to describe a particular place based on a drawing, and to narrate a sequence of events in the present, past, and future using drawings in the test booklet as a guide. Parts five and six of the SOPI require the examinee to tailor his or her discourse strategies to selected topics and real-life situations. These parts assess the examinee's ability to handle the functions and content that characterize the Advanced and Superior levels of the ACTFL guidelines, or levels two through four of the ILR skill level descriptions. Like the OPI, the SOPI can end with a wind-down. This is usually one or more easy questions designed to put the examinee at ease and to facilitate the ending of the examination in as natural a manner as possible.

After the test is completed, the tape is scored by a trained

rater using the ACTFL/ILR scale. The score an examinee earns may range from the Novice level to High Superior. (See Figure 1.) The Novice level is equivalent to level 0 or 0+ on the ILR scale, while High Superior is equivalent to a rating of between 3+ and 5 on the ILR scale.

#### **Research and development involving the SOPI**

In five studies involving different test development teams and different languages, the SOPI has shown itself to be a valid and reliable surrogate of the OPI. Clark and Li (1986) developed the first SOPI, although they did not label it as such, in an effort to improve on the Recorded Oral Proficiency Interview, or ROPE test, which was a semi-direct version of the OPI containing instructions and questions entirely in the target language (Lowe and Clifford, 1988). Clark and Li developed four forms of a ROPE-like test of Chinese, with instructions and scenarios in English, and then administered the four forms and an OPI to 32 students of Chinese at two universities. Each test was scored by two raters and the scores on the two types of test were statistically compared. The results showed the correlation between the SOPI and the OPI to be .93.

Shortly after arriving at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in 1986, I read Clark's report on this project and realized that these favorable results merited replication by other researchers in situations involving other test developers and learners of other languages. As a result, I applied for a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop similar tests in four other languages. Fortunately, the grant was funded, and in

August 1987 I began the development of a similar semi-direct interview test of Portuguese, called the Portuguese Speaking Test (Stansfield, et al., 1990).

Three forms of this test and an OPI were administered to 30 adult learners of Portuguese at four institutions. Each test was also scored by two raters. In this study a correlation of .93 between the two types of test was also found. In addition, the SOPI showed itself to be slightly more reliable than the OPI, and raters reported that the SOPI was easier to rate, since the format of the test did not vary with each examinee.

During 1988 and 1989, I directed the development of tests in Hebrew, Hausa, and Indonesian. The Hebrew SOPI, or Hebrew Speaking Test (HeST) as we call it, was developed in close collaboration with Elana Shohamy and her associates at the University of Tel Aviv (Shohamy et al., 1989). In order to accommodate the different settings where the language is studied and used, two forms of the test were developed for use in Hebrew language schools for immigrants to Israel, and two forms were developed for use in North America. The first two forms were administered to 20 foreign students at the University of Tel Aviv and the other two forms were administered to 10 students at Brandeis University and 10 students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Each group also received an OPI. The correlation between the OPI and this SOPI for the Israeli version was .89, while the correlation for the U.S. version was .94. Parallel-form and interrater reliability were also very high. The average interrater reliability was .94 and parallel form reliability was .95. When examinees' responses on different

forms were scored by different raters, the reliability was .92.

Recently, Dorry Kenyon (my associate at CAL) and I reported on the development and validation of SOPIs in Indonesian and Hausa (Stansfield and Kenyon, 1989). The development of the Indonesian Speaking Test (IST) posed special problems. Indonesian is one of those languages where the context of the speech situation seems to be especially important. Because of this, we strived to contextualize the test items to an even greater degree than had been done for other languages. In order to do this, we specified the age, sex, and position or relationship of the supposed interlocutor for the examinee. During trialing, we noticed that examinees tended to assign a name to the person they were speaking with. As a result, we gave each interlocutor, as appropriate, a name on the operational forms. To validate the test, 16 adult learners of Indonesian were administered two forms of the IST and an OPI. The correlation with the OPI was .95. Reliability was also high, with interrater reliability averaging .97, and parallel-form reliability averaging .93 for the two raters. When different forms and different raters were used, the reliability was also .93.

The development of two forms of the Hausa Speaking Test also posed special problems. Here, it was necessary to develop a version for male examinees and a version for female examinees because the pronoun "you" carries gender in Hausa as it does in Hebrew. Because no ACTFL or ILR-certified interviewer/raters were available for Hausa, it was not possible to administer an OPI to the 13 subjects who took the Hausa Speaking Test.

However, two speakers of Hausa as a second language who had received familiarization training in English with the ACTFL/ILR scale, subsequently scored the Hausa test tapes on that scale. The raters showed high interrater reliability (.91) in scoring the test and indicated that they believed it elicited an adequate sample of language from which to assign a rating.

#### **Comparative characteristics of the SOPI and the OPI**

A comparison of the two types of test demonstrates that the SOPI can offer a number of advantages over the OPI with respect to the fundamental psychometric characteristics of reliability, validity, and practicality.

**Reliability.** The SOPI has shown itself to be at least as reliable and sometimes more reliable than the OPI. During the development of the Chinese Speaking Test (Clark and Li, 1986) the OPI showed an interrater reliability of .92, while the four forms of the SOPI showed an interrater reliability of reliability of .93. On the Portuguese SOPI that I developed, the interrater reliability for three forms varied from .93 to .98, while the reliability of the OPI was .94. In addition, some raters reported that it was sometimes easier to reach a decision regarding the appropriate score for an examinee who was taking the SOPI than for an examinee who was taking the OPI. This is because the OPI requires that each examinee be given a unique interview, whereas the format and questions on an SOPI are invariant. Under such circumstances, it is often easier to arrive at a decision on the score. The situation is similar to the scoring of a batch of essays on the same topic versus scoring

essays on different topics. The use of identical questions for each examinee facilitates the rater's task. I should be careful to point out that although the rater's task is made easier by the use of identical questions, competent raters are able to apply the scale reliably when different questions are used. Thus, the use of a common test for all examinees does not guarantee an improvement in reliability over the face-to-face interview.

The length of the speech sample may also facilitate a decision on a rating. The OPI typically takes about 20 minutes to administer and produces about 15 minutes of examinee speech. The SOPI takes 45 minutes to administer and produces 20-23 minutes of examinee speech. Thus, there is a greater sample of performance for the rater to consider on the SOPI and this sample may make distinctions in proficiency more salient.

Another advantage is found in the recording of the test for later scoring. In the OPI, the same interviewer typically rates and scores the test. Yet this interviewer may not be the most reliable or accurate rater. In the SOPI, one can have the tape scored by the most reliable rater, even if this rater lives in a different city or region of the country.

**Validity.** Many factors can affect the validity of a measure of oral proficiency. The consideration of several factors explains why the SOPI may be as valid as the OPI.

The SOPI usually produces a longer sample of examinee speech. When this is the case, the more extensive sample may give it greater content validity.

In an OPI, the validity of the speech sample elicited is in

large part determined by the skill of the interviewer. If the interviewer does not adequately challenge the examinee by posing demanding questions, the examinee will not be given a chance to demonstrate his or her language skills. If the interviewer consistently asks questions that are too demanding for the examinee, then the examinee's language skills may appear to be consistently faulty on all tasks, with the result that a lower score may be assigned than is warranted. Similarly, the interviewer may miss opportunities to question the examinee about topics that are of personal interest or within his or her range of awareness. Or, the interviewer and the interviewee may have very little in common. Finally, if the interview is too short, it will not adequately sample the language skills of the interviewee. All of these factors can affect the validity of the OPI.

Although interviewers can vary considerably in their interviewing techniques, the SOPI offers the same quality of interview to each examinee. Parallel forms of the SOPI can be developed with great care over a period of time, so as to ensure that they are comparable in quality and difficulty. The parallel forms developed thus far have shown nearly identical correlations with OPIs administered by highly trained interviewers. Thus, different forms of the SOPI, unlike different interviewers, appear to be equal in validity, even when rated by different raters.

Many second language educators feel that the face-to-face OPI is the most valid test available. Thus, it is appropriate to consider the effects of the SOPI's semi-direct format on its

validity as a measure of general oral language proficiency. One point of comparison is the naturalness with which topics are switched during the test. Within the context of the SOPI, the topic changes with each question in Parts II through VI, for a total of approximately 15 transitions, depending on the language of the test. Yet because of the test-like format of a semi-direct measure, the change in topic seems perfectly natural to the examinee. In the OPI, the examiner must change the topic on a number of occasions in order to provide adequate sampling of the content. This switching of topic, if done too abruptly, can seem awkward and disconcerting to the interviewee. This is not the case when the topic is switched naturally, but such natural changes in topic of the conversation can only be brought about a limited number of times (4-8) within the span of a 20 minute conversation. As a result, the SOPI makes possible a greater number of topical transitions, which contribute to greater content sampling on the part of the SOPI.

Another point of comparison between the two test formats is the role play situation. Usually, the OPI includes two role plays. These are usually presented to the interviewee on a situation card, written in English. The interviewee reads the card to the interviewer and then both interlocutors play the roles prescribed on the card. Although somewhat artificial, these situations are incorporated into the interview because they provide useful diagnostic information on the strengths and weaknesses of the interviewee. Yet only two situations are included in the OPI. The SOPI includes five situations in Part VI, thereby providing a greater amount of diagnostic information

than the OPI.

Since speaking into a tape recorder is admittedly a less natural situation than talking directly to someone, it is possible that the SOPI format will cause undue stress. However, feedback from examinees has not indicated that this is the case. While most examinees prefer the face-to-face interview, because of the human contact it provides, about a quarter of the examinees either have no preference or actually prefer to speak into a tape. The latter group claim they feel less nervous than when forced to converse face-to-face with an unfamiliar and highly competent speaker of the target language.

One may also examine the test situation itself as a source of unnaturalness. In the OPI the examinee gets to speak directly to a human being. However, the examinee is fully aware that he or she is being tested, which automatically creates unnatural circumstances. As van Lier (1989) has noted, in the OPI the aim is to have a successful interview, not a successful conversation. Thus, even the OPI is not analogous to a real conversation. The SOPI, on the other hand, would seem even less natural, since it is neither a conversation nor an interview. In short, neither format produces a "natural" or "real-life" conversation.

As mentioned above, the interview usually contains two role plays that are described to the examinee on situation cards printed in English. During this portion of the interview, the examinee is fully aware that the examiner is not a waiter, a hotel clerk, a barber, a cab driver, or the next door neighbor. Yet the examinee has to engage in spontaneous acting with the interviewer in order to succeed. The situational portion of the

SOPI may be actually more natural than in the OPI, since the examinee is free to imagine that he or she is talking to the people described in the situation prompt.

In the SOPI format, the aim of the interviewee is to perform as well as possible on the test. Unnaturalness seems to be a natural part of the test situation. Tests themselves are unnatural samples of examinee performance. This is a fundamental reason why the validity of test scores is always an important issue. Tests, whether direct, semi-direct, or indirect, are mere indicators of the true underlying ability they claim to measure. Yet tests can be valid measures of this ability, whether they are natural in format or not.

Further examination of the nature of the OPI gives critical clues as to why the SOPI correlates so highly with it, even when the OPI is conducted by experienced, expert interviewers. The explanation probably lies in the limitations of the OPI itself. Since the SOPI does not measure interactive language, and the two tests measure the same construct, then the examinee's skill in verbal interaction must not play a significant role on the OPI. Consideration of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee on the OPI suggests this is indeed the case. The interviewer typically asks all the questions and maintains formal control over the direction of the conversation. The interviewee plays the subservient role, answering questions and responding to prompts initiated by the interviewer with as much information as possible. He or she has little if any opportunity to ask questions, to make requests, exclamations or invitations. Nor does the interviewee have the opportunity to demonstrate

sociolinguistic competence in a variety of situations, such as when speaking to members of the opposite sex, older and younger persons, or individuals of higher or lower status. The interviewer is trained to maintain a secondary profile, and to not engage in back-and-forth discussion or exchange with the examinee. Both parties understand that it is the examinee's responsibility to perform. Little true interaction takes place.

The lack of authentic interaction in the OPI prompted van Lier (1989) to state: "Since it is so difficult to attain conversation in the formal context of an OPI and since we have not developed sufficient understanding of what makes conversation successful in order to conduct reliable and valid ratings, it would be easier for all concerned if we could dispense with conversation as the vehicle for evaluation." (p. 501) I do not propose dispensing with the OPI. However, given the lack of true interaction in the OPI, it is not surprising that the SOPI and the OPI correlate so well.

It should be noted that there may be circumstances where interactive skills or pragmatic or sociolinguistic competence need to be measured. In such circumstances, the OPI would appear to be potentially more useful. However, in order to do this, one would have to modify the OPI to focus on these abilities. One would also have to modify the scale, so that it would reflect the examinee's interactive ability. Or, perhaps it would be more appropriate to assign a separate rating for interaction.

Perhaps a greater understanding of the two test types can be gleaned from qualitative research into examinees' performance on them. If a content analysis or discourse analysis of examinee

speech indicated that either format elicits a wider spectrum of language skills, then additional content validity would accrue to that format. Similarly, if the two test types seem to elicit language that is qualitatively different, then it would be helpful to know this as well. Currently, we have available tapes containing examinee responses under both formats. Elana Shohamy and her associates are currently planning a qualitative study of the Hebrew tapes. We are willing to make the tapes in Chinese, Portuguese, Hausa and Indonesian available to other serious researchers. The results of such studies have the potential to contribute greatly to our understanding of the validity of each type of test.

**Practicality.** The SOPI offers a number of practical advantages over the OPI. The OPI must be administered by a trained interviewer, whereas any teacher, aide, or language lab technician can administer the SOPI. This may be especially useful in locations where a trained interviewer is not available. In the US, this is often the case in languages that are not commonly taught, which are those for which I have developed SOPI tests thus far.

Another advantage is that the SOPI can be simultaneously administered to a group of examinees by a single administrator, whereas the OPI must be individually administered. Thus, the SOPI is clearly preferable in situations where many examinees need to be tested within a short span of time.

The SOPI is sometimes less costly than the OPI. If a trained interviewer is not available locally, one will have to be

brought to the examinees from a distance, which can result in considerable expenditure in terms of the cost of travel and the interviewer's time. The fact that the SOPI makes it possible to administer the test simultaneously to groups obviates the need for several interviewers who would interview a number of examinees within a short period of time.

### Conclusion

An examination of the SOPI research, which has been carried out on different examinees, and on tests of different languages produced by different test development teams, shows that the SOPI correlates so highly with the OPI that it seems safe to say that both measures test the same abilities. The SOPI has also shown itself to be at least as reliable as the OPI, and in some cases more so. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that it is as good as an OPI in many situations. Furthermore, a comparison of the advantages of each has shown that the SOPI can offer certain practical and psychometric advantages over the OPI. Thus, it may be useful to consider the circumstances that should motivate the selection of one format or the other.

Since the tasks on the SOPI are ones that can only be effectively handled by responding in sentences and connected discourse, the SOPI is not appropriate for learners below the level of Intermediate Low on the ACTFL scale or level 1 on the ILR scale, since examinees who proficiency is below this level use words and memorized phrases, not sentences, to communicate. Similarly, the standardized, semi-direct format of the test does not permit the extensive probing that may be necessary to

distinguish between the highest levels of proficiency on the ILR scale, such as levels 4, 4+, and 5.

The purpose of testing may also play a role in the selection of the appropriate format. If the test is to have very important consequences, it may be preferable to administer an SOPI, since it provides control over reliability and validity of the score. Such would seem to be the case when language proficiency will be used to determine whether or not applicants are qualified for employment. Examples of such important uses are the certification of foreign trained medical personnel and the certification of foreign language and bilingual education teachers. (I should mention that the Texas Education Agency, which is the coordinating agency for public schools in the state of Texas, agrees with me on this point. Recently, it decided to award CAL a contract to develop SOPI tests in Spanish and French for teacher certification purposes in Texas.)

When conducting research on language gains or language attrition, use of the SOPI would permit one to record the responses of an examinee at different points in time, such as at six months intervals. These responses could then be analyzed in order to determine their complexity. In this way, the SOPI would serve as a valid measure of general language competence, while allowing the researcher to completely standardize the administration. Many other research situations requiring a valid and reliable measure of general oral language proficiency, would also seem to call for the SOPI.

When scores will not be used for important purposes, and a competent interviewer is available, it would seem preferable to

administer an OPI. Such is often the case with placement within an instructional program. In such a situation, an error in placement can be easily corrected. Similarly, an OPI administered by a competent interviewer may be preferable for program evaluation purposes because of the qualitative information it can provide and because the score will not have important repercussions for the examinee. Ultimately, the type of test chosen will depend on the purpose for testing, and on practical considerations.

It may appear that I am suggesting that the OPI is not a valid and reliable test. This is not the case. I continue to view the OPI as potentially being the more valid and reliable measure when carefully administered by a skilled interviewer and rated by an accurate rater. I also recognize that the OPI can assess a broader range of examinee abilities than can the SOPI. The central point I have made here is that when quality control is essential, and when it can not be assured for all examinees using the OPI, then the SOPI may be preferable, given the high degree of quality control it offers. When quality control can be assured, or when it is not a major concern, or when assessment at very low and very high ability levels is required, or when practical considerations do not dictate test type, then the OPI may be preferable.

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Figure 1. SOPI Scale.

<b>NOVICE</b>	The Novice level is characterized by the ability to communicate minimally with learned material. The PST is designed for examinees who exceed this level. Any examinee not achieving the minimum ability to be rated at the Intermediate level will receive this rating.
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>	The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker's ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode;</li> <li>• initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks; and</li> <li>• ask and answer questions.</li> </ul>
Intermediate-Low	Able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented and social situations. Misunderstandings frequently arise, but with repetition, the Intermediate-Low speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.
Intermediate-Mid	Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic and common communicative tasks and social situations. Although misunderstandings still arise, the Intermediate-Mid speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.
Intermediate-High	Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. The Intermediate-High speaker can generally be understood even by interlocutors not accustomed to dealing with speakers at this level, but repetition may still be required.
<b>ADVANCED</b>	The Advanced level is characterized by the speaker's ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• converse in a clearly participatory fashion - initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events;</li> <li>• satisfy the requirements of school and work situations; and</li> <li>• narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.</li> </ul>
Advanced-Plus	In addition to demonstrating those skills characteristic of the Advanced level, the Advanced Plus level speaker is able to handle a broad variety of everyday, school, and work situations. There is emerging evidence of ability to support opinions, explain in detail, and hypothesize. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows remarkable fluency and ease of speech but under the demands of Superior-level, complex tasks, language may break down or prove inadequate.
<b>SUPERIOR</b>	The Superior level is characterized by the speaker's ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• participate effectively and with ease in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics; and</li> <li>• support opinions and hypothesize using native-like discourse strategies.</li> </ul>
High-Superior	This rating, which is not part of the ACTFL scale, is used in PST scoring for examinees who clearly exceed the requirements for a rating of Superior. A rating of High-Superior corresponds to a rating of 3+ to 5 on the scale used by the Interagency Language Roundtable of the U.S. Government. The PST is not designed to evaluate examinees above the ACTFL Superior level.